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SUBJECT: TURKEY: OPPOSITION CHP SEES AN AK PARTY DIVIDED
AGAINST ITSELF AND SEEKS TO EXPLOIT

(U) Classified by Political Counselor John Kunstadter;
reasons: 1.5 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: Trounced at the polls on Nov. 3, Deniz Baykal's CHP is already trying to turn the tables on the Islam-influenced AK Party government. CHP is now focusing on the headscarf controversy that flared up again when AK's Speaker of Parliament Arinc and his headscarf-clad wife were on hand together to see off President Sezer on a foreign visit late last month. We expect CHP to continue to hammer at this point in the aftermath of the Nov. 29 National Security Council meeting, during which AK was lectured by the military about the virtues of Kemalist secularism (septel). End summary.

2. (C) Much of the AK (Justice and Development) Party's success in the Nov. 3 national election rested on its ability to woo both religious voters and those on the center-right disaffected by mainstream party fecklessness. According to contacts on the political left-of-center, AK also benefited from the perception that its main rival, the CHP (Republican People's Party), is an elitist organization out of touch with ordinary Turks; CHP leader Baykal's unpopular personality, they say, also encouraged some center-left voters to stay home on election day.

3. (C) Aware of their party's shortcomings, senior CHP officials are trying to shift the focus to AK and its own foibles. They tell us that a split between AK's "religious" and "mainstream" wings is already growing and will ultimately, they hope, lead to AK's demise -- either via a confrontation with the Deep State or in a decisive defeat at the ballot box.

-- CHP Deputy Group Chairman (party whip) Mustafa Ozyurek pointedly told us Nov. 22 that CHP is "extremely uncomfortable" with Arinc's supposed headscarf posturing, predicting that this is only the beginning of anti-Kemalist things to come. Ozyurek claimed that the headscarf is the Islamist camel's nose under the Kemalist tent. Religious Turks, he asserted, "now want equality" with the secularists whom Ozyurek represents -- tacitly implying that they have not yet achieved that status -- "but will soon seek superiority." (Note: aware of the risk of being boxed in so early in AK's tenure, AK leader Erdogan subsequently issued a clear warning to party members to avoid bringing up the headscarf issue in public. End note.)

-- Haluk Koc, another CHP Deputy Group Chairman, reiterated to Poloff Nov. 29 CHP's concern about the headscarf. He averred that an AK split is inevitable, but is likely to emerge only slowly over the next year. Koc explained that AK's "religious base" will demand more progress on politically sensitive issues such as the headscarf, which CHP and the Establishment see as a redline. He predicted that "moderates" within AK will not support challenging the State on the issue.

Comment

14. (C) While some of the CHP officials' comments reflect wishful thinking, they also capture what may be AK's Achilles heel. From what CHP is telling us, it is clear that the party hopes to exploit the headscarf controversy to burnish its own credentials as parliamentary champion of the Kemalist establishment; paint AK as confrontational and as a mere continuation of Refah-Fazilet Islamism; and drive a wedge between what it sees as competing factions within AK. Indeed, one local AK official -- a former administrator in a center-right party -- told us prior to the elections that if AK pushes too hard on religious issues, people like himself will leave the party in droves. AK leaders except Arinc have been trying to avoid the headscarf issue, recognizing the danger of being decisively labeled "reactionary" as they try

to consolidate their Government's position early in its
tenure. Nevertheless, we can expect CHP to continue trying
to hammer away at this chink in the AK armor.
PEARSON